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JAZZ FESTIVAL NOTES

Have a Pink Martini with your Grenadier

A recap of this week's performances

As a torrential downpour brews outside, the pageant presents music for a rainy day

THURSDAY

BELL-SAMSUNG STAGE

The Montreal International Jazz Festival's free shows set an early benchmark this year – opening night at 8, to be precise – with a wonderful set by Eric Bibb.

Taking the Bell-Samsung stage armed only with an acoustic guitar, the singer quickly hushed all the surrounding buzz with a sweet, lilting fingerpicked take on the folk standard Candy Man.

After a few numbers, he was joined by Montreal's MVP of roots music, **Michael Jerome Brown**, who did second-guitar duties on 12-string and slide, and played violin on Goin' Down Slow. Muscular blues, gritty gospel and even James Taylor-ish melodicism made for a beautifully-paced and compelling performance.

The only sour note came at the very end, during Bibb's own A Ship Called Love, when his heartfelt plea for world harmony was drowned out by some moronic crowd-baiting ("Etes-vous prêts?") from an emcee on the nearby GM stage.

BERNARD PERUSSE

THE SPECTRUM

Feist was feeling the love as she played an adventurous set that strayed considerably from the safety net of her acclaimed album Let It Die, then brought the house down during the encore with a cover of Nina Simone's See Line Woman. It's a regular on her set list, but felt particularly poignant at the jazz fest. She deftly conjured the song's stream-of-consciousness spirit, deep soul and gospel-infused energy.

Speaking of deep soul – a few hours later, trumpetist **Roy Hargrove** and his band provided an early fest highlight with an amazing throwdown of black music styles, from P-funk to hip-hop and R&B, showing jazz's integral place in that continuity.

TCHA DUNLEVY

OFF FESTIVAL

We caught up with the Off Festival de Jazz de Montréal on Thursday night and the music was outstanding. At 8:30 p.m., violinist **Mark Feldman** and pianist **Sylvie Courvoisier** got two standing ovations after playing from John Zorn's Masada Book Two, the Book of Angels, to a packed Lion d'Or on Ontario St. E.

Feldman played the music, built around Jewish-flavoured themes, with the confident bowing technique and fluidity of a master soloist. Courvoisier, playing in a passionate, percussive style, was right in sync, varying the sonic texture by playing broad clusters or strumming the piano strings.

At 10, the 13-member **Altsys Jazz Orchestra**, led by saxophonist **Jennifer Bell**, performed at O Patro Vys on Mount Royal Ave., where a crowd of about 75 heard guitarist **Bill Coon**, a former Montreal resident, play his arrangements and compositions.

Back at the Lion d'Or, Nordic connect sizzled. It features Montreal-based saxophonist **Christine Jensen**, her sister, trumpeter **Ingrid Jensen**, and drummer **Jon Wikan**, both based in New York City, with Swedish pianist **Maggi Olin** and bassist **Mattias Welin**. Trumpeter Jensen and drummer Wikan provided much of the dynamic sizzle, while saxophonist Jensen developed the lyrical and harmonic possibilities.

IRWIN BLOCK

METROPOLIS/CLUB SODA

Pink Martini delighted a sold-out crowd with a big-band lounge sound, though the show came off a little light (not so filling). Which leads to the overhyped New York four-piece **Brazilian Girls**, mid-night at Club Soda – their slick, art-house trip-pop is all style, little substance.

T'CHA DUNLEVY

FRIDAY

THE SPECTRUM

It was nice when **Charles Lloyd** came back a dozen or so years ago after a decades-long spiritual search. But Lloyd, 67, showed he is one of the most restlessly original improvisers of our time. He blended his sublime laid-back touch (inherited from Lester Young) with, amazingly, the raw power of mid-to-late-period John Coltrane. Not too shabby for someone tagged as "hippie-jazzer" from the '60s.

No Mo Quitte Pas, complete with heady quotes from A Love Supreme, crystallized the evening as pianist **Geri Allen**'s confident inventions flowed like a river. **Larry Grenadier**, bassist for **Brad Mehldau**'s trio, got the chance to trip on open-ended modal vamps. Rising drummer **Eric Harland** offered a solo for the ages, adding to his arsenal to go deeper into the rhythms, a bravura performance without a scintilla of showboating.

JOHN KENNEY THE GAZETTE

China Forbes of Pink Martini performs at Metropolis Thursday. The Oregon band combines jazz, Latin, lounge and world influences.

It's what jazz is all about – spontaneity, virtuosity, inspiration and spirituality rolled into one. Yeah, that good.

JUAN RODRIGUEZ

Brent Johnson was only warming up, but as the sinewy scream of his slide ripped through the Spectrum, bluesman **Bryan Lee** – a killer guitarist himself – chuckled and announced "He is ready to kick your ass, baby."

With that, the band leaned into I Gave You What You Wanted, But It Ain't My Fault You Didn't Like What You Got. That title was clearly not meant for the crowd, as Montreal always goes nuts for Lee's funky, rocking sets. This time out, we fell in love with the twin-harmony attack of Lee and Johnson's lead phrases, which was reminiscent of the Allman Brothers. Appropriately, the surprise of the night was a fire-breathing version of Whipping Post.

BERNARD PERUSSE

CARREFOUR GM

You'll be forgiven if you don't remember their names: **Janusz Wojtarowicz**, **Marcin Galazyn**, **Pawel Baranek**. But the sight of three Polish accordionists just off the plane from Warsovie in Blues Brothers shades – getting cosmic sonorities from their squeeze boxes on songs with titles like Trans-Accordion and PlayStation Helicopter – was worth remembering for the transfixed curiosity-seekers who braved the tropical downpour. Collectively known as **Motion Trio**, they made a splash with spiky twists on an instrument that retains its odd appeal because it doesn't sound synthesized.

JUAN RODRIGUEZ

CLUB SODA

She might look like the beautiful, blonde Swede from central casting, but **Viktoria Tolstoy** – Leo's great-great granddaughter – is no pretty face with delusions of artistry. Tolstoy demonstrated the range and control in her beautiful voice, with help from a sympathetic and razor-sharp trio: **Hans Andersson** on bass, **Peter Danemo** on drums and the masterful pianist **Jakob Karlzon**. The accompanists, with Karlzon the outstanding player, brought a range of dynamics and colours to Tolstoy's sophisticated blend of jazz and urban pop.

BERNARD PERUSSE

METROPOLIS

The Metropolis turned into the rocking-est church in town when **Mavis Staples** and the **Blind Boys of Alabama** evangelized the club with a solid backbeat for three-and-a-half hours, causing atheists to shuffle around nervously. While Staples's pedigree is impeccable and her sweet-soul music addictive, some were overheard grumbling that her robust 45-minute opening set made for too much Mavis. Not so with the Blind Boys, who tore the place up with their stunning harmonies and rocking gospel.

Among the highlights: an authoritative reading of **Curtis Mayfield**'s people Get Ready and a particularly inspired God Said It. But what will keep people talking is the sight of 75-year-old **Jimmy Carter** being led into the crowd to testify and do some old-fashioned call-and-response. The man is a hurricane of energy.

BERNARD PERUSSE

JAZZ FEST DISC OF THE DAY

COURTESY OF BLUE NOTE/EMI

Bill Charlap is a master of the American popular songbook.

Bill Charlap

Plays George Gershwin – The American Soul
Blue Note/EMI

Bill Charlap is emerging as the quintessential mainstream pianist interpreting the American popular songbook. In this pristine recording of 10 George Gershwin tunes, Charlap's elegance, simplicity and economy of space give the music a new vitality. Longtime bassist Peter Washington and drummer Kenny Washington seamlessly extend the pianist's vision. On six cuts, Charlap adds Phil Woods (alto sax), Frank Wess (tenor sax), Slide Hampton (trombone) and Nicholas Payton (trumpet). Wess nuances every phrase on How Long Has This Been Going On and Woods reshapes the contours of Bess, You Is My Woman Now. The one-chorus solo closer, Soon, is a fitting signature. The trio performs tonight at 10:30 at Salles du Gesù, 1200 Bleury St. Tickets cost $12.50. To reserve, call (514) 908-0006 or order at www.ticketpro.ca

IRWIN BLOCK

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